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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000826

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, S/CT
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: TWO YEARS ON, AN EMERGING
REALITY ON THE GROUND

REF: A. BANGKOK 684 (TWO YEARS ON - PART I)

[1](#)B. 05 BANGKOK 6595 (TEMPLE ATTACK)

[1](#)C. 05 BANGKOK 1008 (FLIGHT OF BUDDHISTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION: The heightened level of violence seen in southern Thailand since January 4, 2004 has not spilled over to other parts of Thailand, but it is beginning to create a new reality on the ground. Reftel A explained how historic factors may have contained the violence to the far South. In our view, separatist elements do not need to conduct attacks outside of the far South because they are already creating a "separate reality" in the deep South that meets their objectives. This reality comes in the form of increasing estrangement between ethnic Malay-Muslims and ethnic Thai or Chinese-Buddhists, and the flight of non-Malays from the region. This does not mean that the violence is a religious conflict -- or that the Thai government is losing control in the region -- but the emerging demographic reality is reinforcing the historic "separation" of the far South from the rest of Thailand. END SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

DE FACTO SEPARATION IS ALREADY OCCURRING

[1](#)2. (C) Reftel A argued that historic factors, including the militants' cell structure; local suspicion of outsiders; the "Yawi" language; and Malay ethnicity have contributed to a situation whereby the separatists' violence has been contained to the far South. In fact, the committed militants really do not need to spread the conflict to other parts of Thailand because they are beginning to create a reality on the ground in the South that meets their separatist objectives. De facto separation is occurring to some degree between the ethnic Malay-Muslims and ethnic Thai or Chinese-Buddhists populations in the South, both physically and psychologically. Because of fear, intimidation and direct attacks, many non-Malays appear to be leaving the region. The majority ethnic Thai/Chinese who remain in the South appear to be pulling away from their Malay-Muslim neighbors, particularly in the so called "red zones."

[1](#)3. (C) The "Buddhist flight" phenomenon is hard to quantify, but we continue to hear anecdotal evidence of estrangement between the ethnically Thai/Chinese-Buddhists and Malay-Muslims communities (reftels B, C). Some have claimed that as many as a quarter of the non-Muslim population has fled the area. This number may be exaggerated (it is also difficult to separate the numbers of Buddhists moving from rural to urban areas from those who are fleeing the region entirely), but it is clear from on-the-ground observation that significant numbers of non-Malays have left or are planning to leave the region.

NOT A RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

[1](#)4. (C) Although the divisions that are being reinforced in the South fall along religious lines, we do not view the conflict as being primarily religious. Rather, the main fault line appears to be more ethno-nationalist in nature. This phenomenon stems in part from long-standing local historic grievances that many of the ethnic Malay-Muslims have with the Thai government, coupled with the separatist aspirations of a committed minority. Admittedly, Islam is the central identifying cultural factor for the ethnic Malay-Muslims in the South, but it is only part of the reason for the violence.

COMMENT: THAI GOVERNMENT STILL IN COMPLETE CONTROL, BUT...

[1](#)5. (C) The RTG is not losing its grip on power in the South. The shadowy militants cannot provide local services and do not offer an alternate political structure. They have not articulated any demands nor has any credible leadership stepped forward. The militants have not shown they can take and hold territory -- even in the most volatile parts of the South. And despite the widespread fear, uncertainty, and sense of grievance among the local Muslim population, the

separatist militants still do not enjoy widespread support. Seventy-six percent of the local population participated in the last election, which suggests that the overwhelming majority of southerners still maintain some degree of confidence in the Thai national political system.

16. (C) But demographic changes do reflect a shifting reality on the ground. This shift cannot be demarcated on any map or organization chart, but it exists in the hearts and minds of the southern people. A gradual evolution of the South to a more exclusively Muslim area, combined with the historic and growing local suspicion of the government by Muslims, reinforces the perception that the far South is a distinct, "separate" entity from the rest of Thailand. Over time, there is concern that the interaction Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand have with "Buddhists" will be more with the civilians sent to administer the South and with the approximately 45,000 security forces there to keep the peace than with the neighbors they grew up with, and with whom they shared some sense of common identity.

BOYCE